

**MILWAUKIE BUILDING DIVISION**

6101 SE Johnson Creek Blvd  
Milwaukie OR 97206  
503.786.7623  
building@milwaukieoregon.gov

# CONVERTING ATTICS, BASEMENTS, & GARAGES TO LIVING SPACE

Finishing an attic, basement, or garage is a great way to create more living space in your home. It is important to know that most existing basements, attics, and garages were built to be used for storage rather than living space, so each conversion project is unique and the conditions of your site and dwelling will determine the scope and feasibility of the project.

## **Increasing Your Livable Space**

This publication is for homeowners who want to increase livable space in their single family homes by converting an attic, basement, or garage, or legalize existing space that was converted without permits.

## **Permit Requirements**

A building permit is required to convert attics, basements or garages to living space. Depending on the scope of work, your project may also require electrical, plumbing, or mechanical permits. Speaking with staff about zoning and building issues early in the planning of your project is recommended.

## **Evaluating Your Existing Space**

In unfinished areas, existing features such as ceiling heights, windows, stairs and insulation may not meet current building code requirements for finished space. These conditions could make it expensive, difficult or even impossible for you to change your attic, basement, or garage into living space.

## **Other Conditions That May Pertain to Your Project**

### **Garage Conversions**

If you plan to convert your garage to living space, you will need to show how you will maintain one required onsite parking space. The space may be either covered or uncovered, but must be a minimum of 9 ft x 18 ft and be located outside the required front yard and street side yard setbacks.

### **Attic Conversions**

Determine if the existing attic floor structure is strong enough to carry the weight of people and furniture. If converting attic space to living space would mean raising the roof, zoning height regulations may affect your project. Adding a new dormer or enlarging an existing dormer may trigger additional structural improvements to the existing structure for the purpose of resisting wind or earthquake loads, unless the addition is defined as minor by Building Department staff. If you are converting 800 sq ft or more, you may be required to dedicate right-of-way to the city if the street fronting the property does not meet current standards.

### **Basement Conversions**

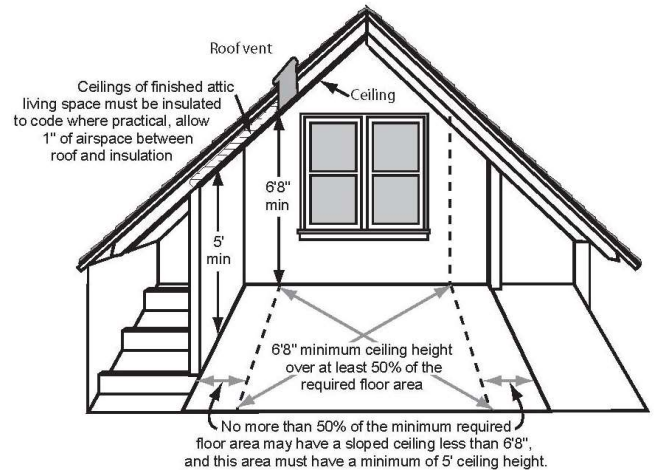
One of the biggest challenges of converting a basement (besides head room/clearances) is meeting the energy code requirements. Existing concrete walls and floors may need to be furred out to accommodate the required insulation.

### **Standards For Existing Structures**

To make conversions easier, the Building Department set the following special standards for existing situations. These standards apply only to conversions that would increase livable space in the existing dwelling, not those that would add an additional dwelling unit (ADU) on the property.

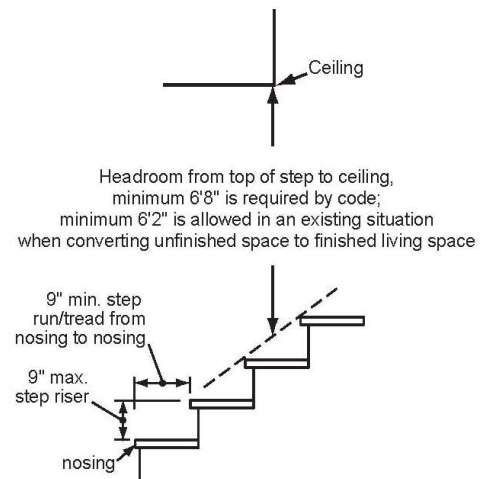
#### **Minimum Room Area and Ceiling Height**

- Habitable rooms (living space) must have at least 70 sq ft of floor area and must not be less than 7 feet wide in any direction. Utility/storage rooms, closets, bathrooms or kitchens may be any size. In living space with sloped ceilings, no more than one half of the minimum required floor area may have a sloped ceiling less than 6 ft 8 in in height with no part of the required floor area less than 5 ft in height.
- Living space in basements must have a ceiling height of at least 6 ft 8 in. Beams, heating ducts, pipes, etc., are allowed as low as 6 ft from the floor if they are within 2 ft of a wall, or as low as 6 ft 2 in where they do not take up more than 10% of the floor area in the room that they are located.
- In bathrooms with sloped ceilings, not more than 75% of the floor area is permitted to have a ceiling height less than 6 ft 8 in, provided an area of 21 in deep by 24 in wide in front of toilets and lavatories has a minimum height of 6 ft 4 in, measured from the finished floor. An area of 24 in by 30 in both in front of, and inside of a tub or shower shall have a minimum height of 6 ft 4 in, measured from the standing surface of the fixture.



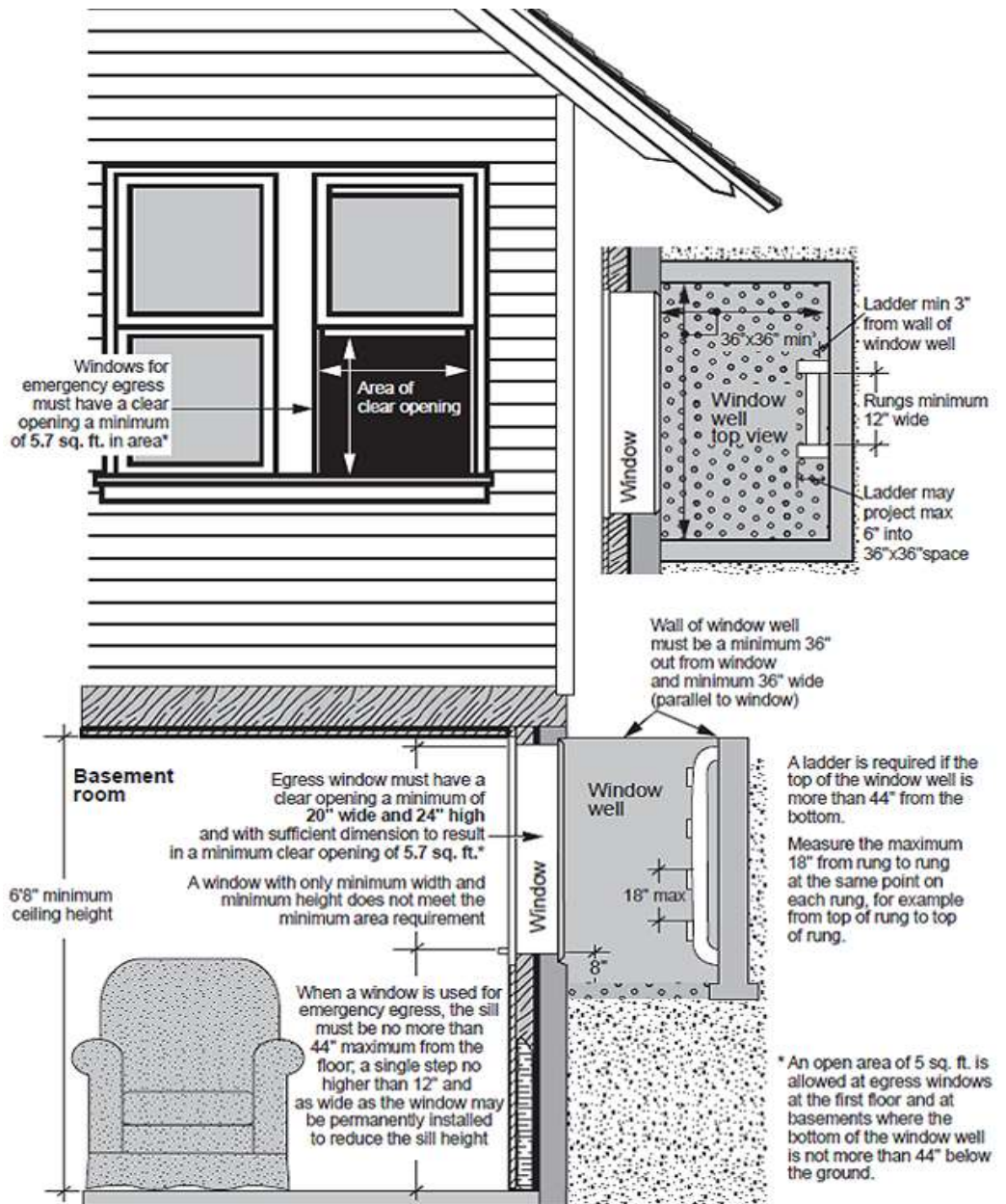
#### **Stairs**

- If you are building a new stairway, it will need to meet current code requirements.
- An existing stairway leading to a new living space may be steeper, narrower and have lower headroom than the current code allows. Existing stairs must be at least 30 in wide and must have headroom of 6 ft 2 in or higher, including landings.
- Landings are required at the top and bottom of stairs. The length and width must be at least as wide as the stairs.
- Doorways are allowed at the top of stairs as long as the door does not swing over the stairs.
- The stairway must have runs no smaller than 9 in and risers no higher than 9 in. The steps should be relatively even. A difference of more than 3/8 in between the largest and the smallest rise or run will not be approved.
- Existing winder stairs, which are triangular in shape, are allowed. New winder stairs must meet current code.



### **Emergency Escape and Rescue Openings (Doors and Egress Windows)**

- Basement with living space and all sleeping rooms must have at least one egress window or exterior door for escape or rescue in case of an emergency. An egress window or an exterior door in a sleeping room located in the basement satisfies the requirement for at least one egress window in the entire basement.
- The door that leads into a converted attic, basement or garage must be at least 6 ft 2 in high and 30 in wide. Exterior doors used for emergency escape and rescue must be at least the same size.
- The egress window sill height must be 44 in or less. A single step, not less than 12 in deep, no higher than 12 in, and at least as wide as the window opening, may be permanently installed to reduce the sill height to 44 in or less, provided there is at least 6 ft from the top of the step to the ceiling.
- An existing window opening used for emergency egress must have a total clear opening at least 5 sq ft in area, and a minimum clear opening width of at least 20 in and a minimum height of at least 22 in. A window with only minimum width and minimum height does not meet the minimum area requirement of 5 sq ft.
- New egress windows may need to have a larger opening area. The minimum openable area shall be 5.7 sq ft with a minimum height of 24 in and a minimum width of 20 in.



### **Insulation and Ventilation**

- In general, additions that increase the floor area of the house must be insulated as though for new construction.
- New windows or doors must meet current code requirements of energy conservation. Existing double glazed windows or storm windows placed over existing single glazed windows will be approved.

- If finishes are removed from the exterior walls or roof so that the framing is exposed, then those cavities must be insulated. R-13 insulation is allowed between existing 2 in x4 in studs or rafters. If the attic areas can be accessed without removing the finishes, they too must be insulated to the maximum extent possible to meet current code.
- Existing concrete exterior walls must be furred out with framing sufficient to accommodate the required insulation. Any wood in contact with concrete must be pressure treated wood.
- When new construction affects basement walls, they must be insulated to current code. Existing insulation in basement walls that is R-11 or greater will be approved.
- Attic and garage ceilings must be insulated to current code. When ceiling height is a problem, R-13 rigid insulation with 1 in airspace between the insulation and roof deck will be approved in spaces between existing 2 in x4 in rafters. Roof ventilation is required to meet current code where insulation is added.
- Minor dormer additions may be constructed and insulated to match existing conditions.
- If new wood floor joists are installed over an existing concrete floor, then insulation and vapor barrier must be provided in the joist space.
- Verify combustion air requirements for all fuel burning appliances when areas containing furnaces and water heaters are finished or made smaller.
- Habitable rooms must have natural ventilation provided by windows or doors to the outdoors with openings of at least 2.5% of the floor areas being vented, unless outdoor air is provided by a mechanical system.
- The building official may approve alternates to the above requirements on a site specific basis provided a reasonable degree of safety is maintained.

Our knowledgeable staff is available to evaluate your proposal, answer your questions and provide you with information you will want to have before deciding whether or not increasing the livable space in your home by converting an attic, basement, or garage is the right option for you.

HELPFUL INFORMATION

- Request inspections by 7am for same day inspections (Planning inspections require two business days).
- Our inspection line is available 24 hours a day at 1-888-299-2821.
- You can request inspections online at [www.buildingpermits.oregon.gov](http://www.buildingpermits.oregon.gov)
- You can request inspections through the smart phone app - Oregon ePermitting Inspections
- Inspections are conducted Monday through Friday (normally between the hours of 8am-4pm, excluding federal holidays).
- If the house is occupied with belongings, there must be an adult over age 18 to provide access.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Building Division	.....	503-786-7623
Planning Division	.....	503-786-7630
Inspection Line	.....	1-888-299-2821
Zoning Information	.....	503-786-7630
Permitting Process	.....	503-786-7623
Allowable Uses	.....	503-786-7630
Setbacks	.....	503-786-7630
Code Questions	.....	503-786-7623
Code Enforcement	.....	503-786-7409
Front Desk (JCB)	.....	503-786-7600
Building Email		<a href="mailto:building@milwaukieoregon.gov">building@milwaukieoregon.gov</a>
Planning Email		<a href="mailto:planning@milwaukieoregon.gov">planning@milwaukieoregon.gov</a>
Engineering Email		<a href="mailto:engineering@milwaukieoregon.gov">engineering@milwaukieoregon.gov</a>